

RESTRUCTURING A SYSTEM

Several years ago one of the best selling novels was The Rector of Justin. It was a story of a headmaster of an exclusive New England prep school, who after his retirement became disillusioned with what he had done with the school. He said, "I see that Justin is like the other schools. Only I, of course, ever thought it was different." As I have attempted to write down what Holy Innocents School has done toward restructuring a system, these words have haunted me. Can I really talk objectively about what has happened--and is happening? However, on second thought, my faculty is rather open and critical, and they keep me honest most of the time.

I spent fourteen years of my life very much involved with a system. This system is better known as the United States Navy, and Herman Wolk in his Caine Mutiny described the Navy as "a system designed by geniuses to be executed by idiots". I think we would agree that in dealing with children the system must be flexible. Goodlad is strong in his belief that the non-graded school is not a system, but is more of a philosophy. In our attempts to reconstruct a system we have arrived at a philosophy which we continue to reevaluate almost daily. There are several ideas which seem to stand out and become a permanent part of our system. In 1831 Dr. Wilbur Fisk became the head of a New England school. His statement clearly stresses the ultimate aim of our school:

Education should be directed in reference to two objects--
the good of the individual educated, and the good of the world.

This is one of the most difficult ideas to be put in practice, but must be placed ahead of achievement tests, IQ scores, and college admissions.

Of course Goodlad and Anderson have been the champions of educational innovations and the non-graded school for many years. They feel that the term "non-graded" does not adequately express what is being done in a school of this kind. The term "continuous growth" or "continuous progress" is a better description of what is going on.

The idea, aim, or philosophy must be clearly spelled out and agreed upon by the faculty. It must be made clear to the students and parents; and there must be constant communication between administration, faculty, students and parents.

Here are some things that we have tried to do in order to restructure a system:

In the first place we agree with Dr. Fisk. "Education should be directed in reference to two objects -- the good of the individual educated, and the good of the world". In general, we believe that elementary and secondary education must continue to improve. Developments in education are now sufficiently advanced to allow for improvement in all areas of school life. There is a need for schools to be receptive to innovation so that they can capitalize on new educational materials and techniques.

We are attempting to provide children with an environment in which they can learn for themselves. We hope that what they learn is useful both to themselves and society. There are several fundamentals which include an understanding of one's self and one's environment (both physical and social). We desire for the student and the teacher to have a sense of harmony within one's self and between one's self and the outside world. The old cliches--self control, self-reliance, self-confidence and the ability to combine freedom with responsibility are important. It is important that the teacher and the student have the ability to communicate clearly, appreciate the beautiful and have a sensitivity for the needs of others.

Provisions for individuality are built into the basic design of the school; These provisions are concerned with interest, methods of approach, conclusions that are drawn from various experiences, rates of social and intellectual development, and preferred working environments.

Original thought is encouraged at all times during the educational process, and not during special periods. Children are encouraged to interact directly with the environment rather than with some adult or textbook's view of the environment, and they often make their own observations and interpretations. The teacher aids the

child in his search for knowledge in a variety of ways, but neither the teacher nor the child regard the teacher as a primary source of knowledge. We hope that no teacher considers the task of education is primarily teaching the child what the adult knows.

Now these are ideas and concepts which are lofty but must be clearly understood, and they must have practical application in all areas of the curriculum. This is most difficult. But we have found that the struggle is worth the effort.

We feel that this type of program can be carried out in almost any kind of cross-section of students--if there is a clear understanding of ability and philosophy. The school has obtained a student body with a wide variety of interests, backgrounds, and capabilities. It recognizes that all children bring to the school both problems and gifts. A school should not reinforce the usual classification of children into "normal" children, "gifted" children, and "problem" children. Insofar as possible, a child's activities are motivated by his own intrinsic interests rather than a desire to receive praise from his teacher, outshine his classmates, or reduce parental anxiety about his academic standing.

The chief discipline that a child experiences is the discipline required to achieve a personal goal rather than the discipline of authority. A child's behavior is governed by the requirements of the task and a concern for others, not by arbitrary demands of an adult on whom the child is dependent.

Children are encouraged to teach and be taught by other children, and the identification of the roles of "teacher" and "student" are not rigid. This does not mean formal teaching. Education must use the dynamic power of the natural group. Children learn as individuals, but interaction with the group is very important.

The evaluation of a child's progress, or of any activity in which the child participates, is made--in part--by the child himself. In general, the ability to make critical evaluations is regarded as an important ability to be developed. He knows when he has done well or poorly, the relationship with the teacher should encourage

improvement.

Opportunities exist for a child to subject himself to the rigors of serious training, achieve exceptional competence in an area of his choice, work on problems whose solutions are unknown, participate in certain of the activities required to run the school, and participate in activities that are designed primarily to help other people.

The role of the teacher is to provide, stimulate, respond, guide, accompany, collaborate, support, aid, consult, evaluate, learn, and enjoy. Each teacher is in contact with a wide variety of children and not merely with a small, well-defined class. Similarly, each child is in contact with a variety of teachers. In addition to possessing a special talent for working with children, each teacher has strong interests of his own. The faculty consists of teachers with complementary abilities and experiences and they work together as a team. It is most important for the school to encourage cooperation among the teachers as well as the children.

Visits from teachers, educators, and parents who are not directly associated with the school are encouraged. Tuesday afternoon speakers and Friday afternoon movies are highlights of the school program. Parents are encouraged to work directly with the faculty in the task of integrating the child's school life with his life at home.

In addition to the permanent teaching staff, there should be a group of consultants available to pursue projects of particular interest for which the staff does not have adequate training or resources. Similarly, provisions should be made for allowing the staff to spend a portion of their time at other institutions learning about recent developments in education. In general, communication with educational research projects should be direct and continuous, and the school should constantly explore new ideas in the search for improved education.

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The school needs to have considerable space, both indoors and outdoors, to accommodate a general freedom of movement, spontaneous physical play, and the variety of activities required by the basic scheme of the school.

Reconstructing a system does not mean concern about low scores on standardized tests or bragging about high ones. The use of high-grade gimmicks, flexible scheduling, T. V., Programmed Instruction, Team Teaching, and a non-graded format are not going to solve our educational problems. All of these can be very useful. But in the process, all too often we forget one simple thing. Although good subject matter and a good system have value, the greatest value lies in what they can do to the learner. We settle for a one-way stretch when we could have a two-way stretch. With the simplest twist of the wrist, we could use subject matter to help youngsters understand and accept themselves and other people. We could help them toward a fine set of values and a sensitivity to truth and beauty. We could enrich their awareness of the opportunities that lie before them. We could change their whole conceptualization of what life is all about and what a good life is like.

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